



Harriet Adams Wilson

“ “

“Stop!” shouted Frado, “strike me, and I’ll never work a mite more for you;” and throwing down what she had gathered, stood like one who feels the stirring of free and independent thoughts.

— Our Nig

” ”

Quick Facts

- * 1828-1863 (?)
- * The first African-American woman to publish a novel in English
- * Author of *Our Nig* (1859)

Biography

Harriet E. Adams Wilson is believed to be the first African-American woman to publish a novel in English. Rediscovered by literary scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in 1981, Wilson displaced Frances E. W. Harper as the mother of the African-American novel. Previously, Harper’s novel *Iola Leroy* (1892) on by an African-American woman. Wilson’s only published work, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, in a Two-Story White House, North. Showing that Slavery’s Shadows Fall Even There. By “Our Nig.”* (1859), is an autobiographical novel based on her life as a black indentured servant in New England.

Few biographical details are known about Wilson’s life. She was probably born in New Hampshire in 1827 or 1828 and does not appear in the public record again until 1850. In that year Harriet Adams was living with the Samuel Boyles family in Milford and may have been their indentured servant. Later that year Adams left the Boyles family and tried to fend for herself economically. On 6 October 1851 she married a fugitive slave named Thomas Wilson and gave birth to a son, George Mason Wilson, in late May or early June of 1852. Thomas Wilson soon deserted his family and ill health forced Wilson to put her son into foster care.

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Harriet Adams Wilson

Biography continued

While working as a dressmaker in Boston, Wilson wrote *Our Nig*, which was published on September 5 1859. As she explains in the preface, the book was an attempt to get her son back: “Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life.” Sadly, her son died of fever on 15 February 1860, six months after the book’s publication. Wilson disappears from the public record after 1863 (Gates, “Harriet E. Adams Wilson,” 268-69).

Wilson’s life is reflected in the trials of her heroine Alfrado. Born to a white woman and a black man, Frado is deserted by her mother at the middle-class Bellmont household at the age of six. As a black indentured servant, “Nig” is overworked and beaten by her mistress. Despite the sympathies of other family members, they do nothing to stop the constant abuse and exploitation. At the age of eighteen, Frado is freed from her tyrannical mistress, but the years of overwork and abuse make her barely able to support herself. She marries Samuel, a fugitive slave on the abolitionist circuit, but he soon abandons her and their baby son. The text ends with a direct appeal for aid from the reader.

In addition to its historical importance, *Our Nig* is remarkable for its literary innovations. In Frado, Wilson rejects the “tragic mulatta” in favor of a dynamic and fully human protagonist, capable of humor, anger, and shrewd political analysis. Gates describes the “genre fusion” created by Wilson’s “appropriation of a black, masculine, literary model (the slave narrative) and a white female one (the sentimental novel)” (268). Indeed the novel has many features of both genres: the subplots involving her mother’s seduction and parental interference in marriage choices are sentimental standards, while Frado’s violent rebellion and quest for literacy are common themes in slave narratives. Julia Stern insightfully argues, however, that there is also an “essential gothicism” in Wilson’s portrayal of motherhood and domesticity. In her story of a childhood of terror at the hands of white Yankee women, Wilson critiques domestic ideology: for her, home is not a place of refuge, but a site of torment. Her maternal figures are not angelic protectors: Frado’s mother abandons her and her foster mother persecutes her. Finally, Wilson’s novel is a stunning indictment of Northern hypocrisy: New England is shown to have its own brand of racial oppression which matches the immorality of Southern slavery.



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Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

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